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ABSTRACT

Social studies documents were collected from teachers in the Tucson, Arizona area and examined using three theories of culture as a way to explore the interrelationships between social studies curriculum and United States society. Malinowski's functionalist position suggests that culture is composed of traits each of which provide a specific function in satisfying human needs. From a functionalist position not only is the social studies curriculum not a functioning whole but its elements are not integrated with a smoothly functioning United States society. Radcliffe-Brown's structural-functionalist position examines the structures produced by a society and their function for maintaining the structure of the larger system. Thus, the analysis of the curriculum looks at the organization of the curriculum and relationships between parts of the curriculum. This approach could prove profitable, but suffers from the inability to cope with changes in society. The structuralism of Levi-Strauss uses an analytical approach based on the assumption that observed phenomena are specific instances of underlying generalized principles of relationship or structure. Reviewing the curriculum in a structuralist approach shows conflicts between the components of society which permit or encourage diversity and those that encourage homogeneity. The myth of benefits of diversity stated in the curriculum may be only a means of compensating for reality. A list of data sources and a bibliography are included. (APG)

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A CULTURAL INTERPRETATION OF A SOCIAL STUDIES CURRICULUM

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Rocky Mountain Regional Conference
on Social Studies Education

April 2-5, 1986
Hyatt Regency
Phoenix, Arizona

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"A Cultural Interpretation of a Social Studies Curriculum"

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On occasion some anthropologists have compared field data on education in non-literate societies with education in the United States and have made suggestions about the goals and content of the curriculum. Franz Boas, for example, implored educators to teach the child how to survive in hostile environments (Boas:1940). Ruth Benedict wrote extensively about the need of teachers to eliminate racial conflict by eliminating the myth of racial superiority (Benedict:17). Margaret Mead urged educators to teach the cultural heritage during periods of rapid cultural change (Mead:34). Ashley Montagu advocated the need of education to focus on creating loving, cooperating human beings (Montagu:31-33). But with the possible exception of Jules Henry, no anthropologist has closely scrutinized the school curriculum as a cultural artifact (Henry:1960). The purpose of this paper will be to report the results of examining several social studies documents using three approaches from anthropological theory.

The social studies documents were collected from teachers and social studies supervisors in the Tucson, Arizona, area. They included teacher constructed curriculum guides, school district guides, state curriculum guides, and social studies texts (Appendix A). Each "cultural artifact" of the social studies curriculum was analyzed in terms of three theories of culture: the functionalist position of Malinowski, the structural-functionalist position of Radcliffe-Brown, and the purely structuralist position of Levi-Strauss (Malinowski; Radcliffe-Brown; Levi Strauss).

There were some initial problems with the analysis. These included the absence of a definition of social studies, a lack of uniformity in the format of the documents, the lack of agreement of the sequencing of the presentation, and a lack of agreement on the content. From what I could deduce I inferred that social studies consist of a composit of social science content. History was not considered a social science yet it appeared to predominate the content. Social studies also includes values, attitudes, social skills, and technical skills such as map reading. This lack of synthesis made it difficult to perform the analysis as there was no integration of the elements as one might find in a tribal society. The social studies appears to be merely a collection of ideas and opinions; it is more like a chemical mixture than a chemical compound.

THE FUNCTIONALIST ANALYSIS

The theoretical position of functionalism suggests that culture is made up of traits each of which provides a specific function in satisfying human needs and in accomplishing this task stabilizes society. For example, among the Hopi Indians of Arizona the manifest function of the Kachina dance is to bring rain to the desert, while the latent function is to provide social integration and group identity. What then are the manifest and latent functions of the social studies curriculum?

The manifest function appeared to be to provide a history of the human species. The latent function appeared to be to provide an American cultural orientation which emphasizes democracy and the capitalist system. Its latent function is also to move the child from the private world of the family to the public world of the state. This could and probably does result in considerable value conflict where the values of the state and the values of the family do not coincide.

"The program will develop understandings, skills and values essential for effective citizenship" (Dallas).

The manifest function as I see it in this statement is intelligent participation in American society, while the latent function is to use knowledge/intelligence to solve the problem of life, to use secular rather than sacred solutions as one might use in a tribal or sacred society.

There were several social studies skills listed in the Arizona State Department of Education Guide which proved interesting to me.

"Attends school regularly and on time."

"Completes and turns in homework on time."

I was at a loss to see how these qualified as a social studies skills, yet I can readily see that they are social skills which are highly functional in an industrial society which requires punctuality, timing, and non-absenteeism in the workplace.

From a functionalist position it would appear that not only is the social studies curriculum not a functioning whole, but its elements are not adequately integrated with the functioning of American society.

The functionalist position has been criticized as being too static. It cannot account for change. The function of a trait may not remain the same over time.

STRUCTURAL-FUNCTIONAL ANALYSYS

The structural-functional theoretical position examines the structures which are produced by a society and their function for maintaining the structure of the larger system. In Hopi society the mother's brother bears the burden of responsibility for educating the mother's sons. This relationship functions to insure the maintenance of the culture and is interdependent with the matrilineal nature of the society. In terms of the organization of a school, the structural-functionalist would suggest that the heirarchical structure of principal-teacher-student is stabilized by using the principal as a "father-figure or mother-figure" as a source of authority for discipline.

"I will send you to the principal's office."

Thus the structural-functional analysis of the social studies curriculum looks at the organization of the curriculum and the relationship between the parts of the curriculum.

What is the structure of the social studies curriculum and how does this structure function? It would appear from this analysis that the structure of the curriculum could be described as laissez-faire. The curriculum appears to have grown like Topsy. This form of structure functions to satisfy a wide variety of cultural expectations. This looseness provides flexibility within a rapidly changing society. Some examples from the documents:

"Social studies integrates for the student the content of history, geography, political science, sociology, psychology, philosophy, anthropology and economics in the study of the human condition" (Jefferson County).

What is the resultant structure here? What is the relationship between philosophy, anthropology, history, and geography? It would be interesting to observe precisely how the teacher in the classroom integrates these disciplines.

"The structure of the social studies program has to do with the basic questions to be asked, the problems to be resolved" . . . "students will profit from experience with different structures" (National Council for the Social Studies).

From the point of view of structural-functionalism this approach could prove to be profitable. Students could study the American kinship system, labor unions, and the court system both in terms of their function and their interdependence within the framework of a democracy.

Like the functionalist theory the structural-functional theory suffers from its inability to cope with changes in society.

THE STRUCTURALIST ANALYSIS

Structualism uses an analytical approach based on the assumption that observed phenomena are specific instances of an underlying generalized principle of relationship or structure. It seeks to go below the surface of behavior to describe a "deep structure" to explain the order of the observed world and how the human mind works. It uses categories with binary distinctions such as life-death, and man-woman as found in symbolic meaning. It focuses on the origins of these concepts. The analysis is frequently applied to myths to reveal the cultural code and the resolution of conflict. Thus the story of Adam and Eve as found in the bible would be analyzed in terms of how it structures the relations between male and female and how it resolves sexual conflict.

When this perspective is applied to the school, the structuralist would examine the rhetoric surrounding formal education in the United States, the notion that formal education is "good for you." What then is bad? Not going to school? Society then has a structure of graduates and non-graduates. But what about a non-graduate who is successful? How is this explained?

An example from a social studies myth:

"The social studies curriculum results in effective citizenship" (Orange Grove Junior High School).

This belief seems to permeate most of the guides in this collection. What is effective citizenship? This was not defined anywhere. What is ineffective citizenship? My inference from the documents would suggest that an effective citizen is one who participates in the political institutions. At least this is the ideal culture. The real culture might suggest that few citizens actually do participate in the political process; therefore the social studies curriculum has not been very successful. The deep structure or cultural code would be participation in societal institutions whether they be family, school, the court system or voting. This cultural code of the social studies curriculum was reinforced with the statement I discovered in the list of social studies skills:

"Takes part in group discussions" (Arizona State Department of Education).

One of the themes expressed in the textbook series which I examined was that cultural diversity was beneficial:

"Physical, social, biological worlds show extreme variation" . . . "Differences enrich societies."

There would appear to be a conflict between the structural components of American society which permit or encourage diversity such as rugged individualism, cultural pluralism, separatism, etc. and those that encourage conformity and homogeniety within the society. The latter is highly functional within an industrial/bureaucratic society. Some authors have suggested that the school society really leads to conformity (Henry:1955; Bowles). The myth of the benefits of diversity promulgated in the social studies curriculum may be a means of compensating for reality.

SUMMARY

This paper has attempted to explore the use of cultural theory in analyzing the social studies curriculum. It may not necessarily be better than other approaches such as philosophical or pedagogical, but it does serve as a method to explore the interrelationship between the social studies curriculum and American society. It can examine the content of the social studies program and compare it with the content of American culture.

At these conferences presentations are primarily about successful practices in teaching social studies. Why are they successful? While the pedagogue is interested in the methods, the processes of teaching, the anthropologist is interested in the content of the social studies and why the content may or may not be "successful."

APPENDIX A

Sources used as data for the analysis

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